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WELLS OF SALT
THE SEARCH FOR THE AUTHENTIC
IN THE POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV

By

Shirley M. Olson

B.A., Cornell College, 1954

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Approved by:

L. M. Welch
Chairman, Board of Examiners

E. C. Murray
Dean, Graduate School

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English

Wells of Salt: The Search for the Authentic in the Poetry of
Denise Levertov (72 pp.)

Director: Lois M. Welch

In a technological age in which we are increasingly removed from direct experience with the natural world, and in which even other human beings and the inner self are often unknown territories, Denise Levertov has set out to search for "the authentic" in the smallest as well as the greatest experiences of her life. Nothing is too insignificant for the intense and reverent attention which is the first premise of her poetic theory. Three main focuses of her attention are: 1) the world of nature; 2) inner experiences such as dualities in her self and her life; and 3) outer experiences such as social-political events and personal relationships. These acutely felt experiences "bring the poet to speech," or are recognized by the poet in their essence and are transformed into language--the second aspect of her search. Third, Levertov believes that each object or experience has an organic form which may also be discovered by strict attention and the imagination, and which gives the poem its structure.

This study seeks to isolate Levertov's working definition of the "authentic" and to explore the methods of her search. These established, it is necessary to test the "authenticity" of her poems, and to determine whether the forms are, in fact, "organic" to the subjects or events of the poems.

The conclusions reached are:

1) By the term "authentic" Levertov means the bringing together of the object or experience itself, its environment, the inscape of the observer and the expression of it in a poem into a total experience of inner and outer reality.

2) Levertov, in her search for the authentic, has followed Rilke in her use of vivid imagery; Pound in experimental phanopoeia (in line breaks and spacing) and melopoeia (in emphasizing the importance of sound in word choice); and William Carlos Williams in her intense concern with the immediate, the thing, the fact.

3) Her search is conducted with the "things at hand" which she considers unique no matter how common, and therefore, her poetry includes a wide variety of objects and experiences both personal and public. This sense of immediacy about everything that touches her has given Levertov a unique voice in modern American poetry.

4) In tracking the "authentic," Levertov has been attentive to the form of an object or experience, which she feels is an organic part of the whole. She maintains that form is revealed along with essence, a belief which is confirmed in the naturalness and variety of the language and mechanics of her poetry.

Denise Levertov, in a most natural and unassuming way, has achieved a solidly brilliant position in modern American poetry. She has grown up under the major social influences of the second half of the century: the Second World War, the technological explosion which has caused both riches and alienation in America, the Viet Nam War, and the struggles of minority groups to achieve equality. As a poet, she developed under the early readings of a classical (home) education in London; admired the writings of Eliot, Pound and Chekov; and later, emigrating to America, moved rapidly into American idiom by way of her friendship and admiration for William Carlos Williams. She was associated with the Projectivists or the "Black Mountain" group of poets who included Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley. From these major influences and experiences as well as the most private or mundane events of her own life, she has found an extensive variety of material for her poetry. Kenneth Rexroth delineates her wide interests:

Denise Levertov writes at ease as a woman about love, marriage, motherhood, deaths in the family. The universal round of domestic life is transformed by the sensibility and moved into the transcendent setting of "wholeness, harmony, and radiance," yet this is only a portion of her work, a group of subjects lying naturally to hand and left easily for other subjects as diverse as can be--poems of social protest, of nature, of meditation and contemplation, of vision. The last three categories are the experience of a visionary at home in the world, with a wider range of knowledge and more different kinds of experience than most poets, let alone most women poets in the past. It's almost invidious to so accentuate her sex, but it is very significant because her poetry, in a far different sense from that of the

distraight contributors to Pagan, is a poetry of sexual liberation of a human person moving freely in the world.¹

In these diverse experiences and interests, she represents a new freedom with which the Twentieth Century identifies--a mobility and a tolerance not understood by or possible for previous generations. She is not, as Rexroth noted, a "Liberated Woman" but a liberated person. Not only does she seem "at home in the world," but she is joyously so. The real beauty and appeal of Levertov's poetry arises from her unique capacity to achieve a firm but delicate balance both personally and technically in a world which seems to overwhelm nature with technology, love with alienation, and tolerance with violence. Rexroth calls her "securely humane...more 'civilized' than other avant-garde poets."² James F. Mersmann finds her "sane and confident" in the powerful directness of her speech.³ Her poems, says Rexroth, communicate with "presentational immediacy." And, Walter Sutton adds, they have "an elegance of diction and phrasing that does not call attention to itself."⁴

Denise Levertov belongs to the world and speaks authoritatively of it because of her lifelong search for "the authentic" in every

¹ Kenneth Rexroth, American Poetry in the Twentieth Century (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 163.

² Rexroth as quoted by Linda Wagner in Denise Levertov (New York: Twayne Publications, 1967), p. 21.

³ James F. Mersmann, Out of the Vietnam Vortex (Wichita: University Press of Kansas, 1974), p. 78.

⁴ Walter Sutton, American Free Verse (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 180.

object, person and experience of her life. She directs an intense and reverent attention to every bit of reality that touches her life, small or great, and translates the "authentic," when it is revealed to her, into poetry of a loose and versatile form she describes as "organic form." From the 1940's through the '70's and now into the '80's, she has never strayed from this basic search, which has allowed her great capacity for variety and change, while maintaining a core of identity. Each phase of her growth has sprung directly from the last; there has been no loss of continuity, even when she had to "relearn the alphabet" in the throes of the disruptive and demoralizing Viet Nam war. Her quest for the authentic can be traced through thirteen volumes of poetry, one prose collection of critical essays, letters and lectures, and one recent collection of interviews and essays by and about her. They are as follows:⁵

The Double Image (1946)

Here and Now (1957)

Overland to the Islands (1958)

With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (1960)

Poems from these first four books have been collected into the text:

Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960 (1979)...(Early Poems)

The Jacob's Ladder (1961)...(Ladder)

O Taste and See (1964)...(Taste)

The Sorrow Dance (1967)...(Sorrow Dance)

⁵ After the first note references, the titles will be referred to in the text and notes by the parenthetical words or initials.

Relearning the Alphabet (1970)...(Alphabet)

To Stay Alive (1971)...(Alive)

Footprints (1972)...(Footprints)

The Freeing of the Dust (1975)...(Dust)

Life in the Forest (1978)...(Forest)

The Poet in the World (1973)...(PW)

Denise Levertov: In Her Own Province (1979)...(Province)

An insatiable curiosity for what "lies within something of another nature" like the seed in a fruit⁶ has constituted one aspect of her search for the authentic. She is also intrigued with the possibilities which lie "beyond the end" of "whatever ends."⁷ Levertov seeks the authentic in the natural world and in the political world, in the objects at hand and the relationships of the heart. Her own definition of the term "authentic" is revealed succinctly in a poem entitled "Matins":

vi The authentic! It rolls
just out of reach, beyond
running feet and
stretching fingers, down
the green slope and into
the black waves of the sea.

vii ...
Marvelous Truth, confront us
at every turn,
in every guise, iron ball,
egg, dark horse, shadow,
cloud
of breath on the air,

⁶ Denise Levertov, "Pleasures," Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960 (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 90.

⁷ "Beyond the End," Early Poems, p. 29.

dwell
 in our crowded hearts
 our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of
 things to be done, the
 ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile
 that we know you, terrible joy.⁸

The "authentic" for Denise Levertov is the total reality of each object and experience in the world. It includes the physical properties of the object--those observable like the green veins of a leaf, and those hidden like the strings and patterns of the atoms within the leaf. It includes the Dinglichkeit (thinginess) or essence of the thing itself that separates it from all other things. The authentic encompasses the immediate environment of the object: sounds, textures, temperature and locale. It includes the being of the observer who is herself an "authentic" being and whose physical self, psychological self, and personal history mold her impressions of the things she observes. The authentic includes, finally, the language by which and in which reality is understood. For Levertov, the language emerges in poetry. The forming of the poem parallels and is an integral part of the process of "seeing" the authentic, so that the poem has a life of itself and becomes itself an authentic object. In one of her numerous poems about writing, she envisions the springs of her inspiration to be "wells of salt" which "brim and brim" until poems emerge, forceful entities of themselves.⁹ Salt is an appropriate

⁸ Denise Levertov, "Matins," The Jacob's Ladder (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 59-60.

⁹ Denise Levertov, "Cancion," Freeing of the Dust (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 49.

metaphor for her poems, which reveal the unique savor of their subjects while having essential properties of their own. The authentic, says Levertov, is always "a recognition, the known/ appearing fully itself, and/ more itself than one knew."¹⁰ Such recognition is a "terrible joy" to her, her raison d'être and the essence of her poetry.

In order to see the authentic clearly, Levertov maintains that one must be alert to the most ordinary experiences and objects of life which "confront us at every turn." There are three aspects of such "seeing":

1. The most common thing is a separate, unique and individual entity containing its special truth which is "uncommon." This truth is often revealed by correspondences or connections within it, or by a dual, paradoxical nature.

2. The whole environment in time and space of the thing or event contributes to the poet's understanding of the authentic.

3. The inscape of the poet (the world of her mind, emotion, imagination and subconscious) is brought to bear on the experience, resulting in the poem.

Levertov illustrates this threefold process of seeing by using metaphors of sound in the final section of one of her longer poems, "Growth of a Poet":

¹⁰ "Matins," Ladder, p. 57.

And now the sounds
are green, a snowdrop's quiet
defiant insignia:

and now the sounds
crackle with mica glitterings,
rasp with cinder,
call with the oboe calm of rose quartz:

and now the sounds
are bone flutes, echo
from deepest canyon, sounds
only the earliest, palest stars may hear:

and now the sounds
are black. Are black sounds.
Black. The deep song
delves. ¹¹

First there is the silent impact of a snowdrop (i.e., reverent attention), then the crackling sounds of the reality itself (as word fragments form in her mind) and the music of flutes (i.e., the organized song, the poem) and finally the "black sounds" or "deep song" of the subconscious which all together create the authentic--the total experience.

The Uncommonplaceness of the Common

The first touchstone in Levertov's quest for the authentic is attention to the most common thing or experience. In this, she stands in the tradition of the Romantic poets like Wordsworth whose "principal object" was to "choose incidents and situations from common life

¹¹ "Growth of a Poet," Dust, p. 84.

and to describe them...in language really used by men."¹² And she believes with William Carlos Williams that each thing is uncommon in its individuality, its unique entity in a particular place and time. No insignificant thing escapes her attention. Honeydew seeds in a pot too small for a melon amuse her; daffodils in a vase, an oak leaf that turns out to be a small brown bird, a photo seen in the morning paper, the squeaking of crutches, tomato juice--everything in her life is a signal, a message, an "open secret." In her poem by that title, birds flying "over the traffic of our lives" are

My sign!
 --yours, too--
 anyone's--
 aloft in the coppery
 afterglow, gulls or pigeons,
 too high to tell,
 way above downtown highrise
 wheeling serene...

 ...a sign
 if I look up--
 or you--
 anyone.¹³

Levertov maintains that this "illumination of dailiness" holds us to the earth and reconciles us to our human condition. A small plant and the stones of a low wall are "brass tacks" of her life which console her and leave her smiling.¹⁴ At times, in fact, the common and

¹² William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads in English Literary Criticism by Daniel G. Hoffman and Samuel Hynes, eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 15.

¹³ "The Open Secret," Relearning the Alphabet (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 73.

¹⁴ Denise Levertov, "Brass Tacks," Footprints (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 39.

the obvious are everything: "There's nothing else to grasp," Levertov notes as she rides the train one day through Bedfordshire, "looking and naming," content with the passing scene as it presents itself.¹⁵ At such rare times when she is content with the present and not hungering after food or "righteousness" or human companionship, the reality of the ordinary physical world gives pleasure enough.

Like the Romantic poets also, Levertov often finds her focus in the objects of Nature. For Levertov, every molecule that presents itself to her senses is "nature" and those presentations are what lend importance to her life. In her "earliest spring" her mother showed her the plants, "inching forward, looking: pausing, examining/ each plant" until a satisfying surprise appeared in crisp snowbells or "egg-yolk gold" crocuses.¹⁶ In another earlier poem, "The Instant," she and her mother hunt mushrooms at sunrise on a hill. Clouds of mist surround them, suddenly parting to reveal not snowbells but the great Mt. Snowdon, magic with Merlin's history and known as the "core of Wales." It seems that, while she may occasionally be content with the obvious physical reality of the world, it is toward this moment of revelation, this "lifetime's look" into the core of things that Levertov consistently moves. One must "be there," among the intricate earth-things, hunting mushrooms, if one hopes to have the vision. Her mother taught her to name the flowers when she was "still close to the

¹⁵ "By Rail Through the Earthly Paradise, Perhaps Bedfordshire," Footprints, p. 46.

¹⁶ "Earliest Spring," Life in the Forest (New York: New Directions, 1978), p. 44.

ground."¹⁷ At ninety, her mother wrote, "I am so tired of appreciating the gift of life." But for Denise Levertov, the ecstasy of the search for the mysterious through nature is still primary. As Ralph Mills, Jr. confirmed in Tri-Quarterly, "What she noticed so shrewdly was that the ordinary is extraordinarily mysterious."¹⁸

In her search for the authentic, Levertov uses the ordinary, taken-for-granted details of her life as a "mythic backdrop" for her poems, to use the terms of A. Poulin, Jr. Poulin contends that contemporary poets are seeking new myths in the "extrarational" patterns of our times.¹⁹ Rather than accepting the traditional literary or religious myths, the new poets observe the events of the present, internalize them, and create myths that are closer to contemporary experience than those inherited from the past. It is through the patterns of commonplace things in her life that Levertov is able to see realities beyond the physical world. "The world is not with us enough," she says:

The world is
not with us enough.
O taste and see

the subway Bible poster said,
meaning The Lord, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination's tongue

¹⁷ "The 90th Year," Forest, p. 24.

¹⁸ Ralph Mills, Jr., "Denise Levertov: Poetry of the Immediate," Tri-Quarterly, IV, 2, (Winter, 1962), pp. 31-37.

¹⁹ A. Poulin, Jr., Contemporary American Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. 465-66.

grief, mercy, language,
 tangerine, weather, to
 breathe them, bite,
 savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
 deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
 living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
 the fruit.²⁰

Beyond the observable sight, sound, smell and texture of the tree, the stone, and the hairbrush, Levertov believes, is the being of the thing itself that "wants to live." Like William Carlos Williams, she does not wish to enhance the commonplace, but to "reveal it in its uncommonplaceness."²¹ The vision which Levertov seeks is not a personification of the inanimate object, but an apprehension of the object's essence which exists apart from the observer. Because individuality creates separate existences for each person as well as each object and experience of the world, every entity is unique and therefore uncommon, no matter how insignificant it may appear. Levertov is able to find fresh interest in the most common "things at hand" because of their individuality. The total reality that she may finally come to experience in the finished poem will include herself; but as a first step, she seems to feel the need to appreciate an object's

²⁰ Denise Levertov, "O Taste and See," O Taste and See (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 53.

²¹ Walter Sutton's "Conversation with Denise Levertov" from The Minnesota Review (1964) in Denise Levertov: In Her Own Province by Linda W. Wagner, Ed. (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 38.

separateness to whatever extent possible.

Some critics have noted an animism in her poetry like that of primitive cultures who have believed that every natural object possesses a spirit which is complete in itself and capable of being understood by other beings like man. As Levertov is drawn to that ancient identification with the world of nature, she attempts by imagination to understand the separate existences of trees, birds and animals. In "Come Into Animal Presence," she sees the animal world as joyful, holy, and totally sufficient without the thoughts of man.²² Their view of the world is not ours. In a violent thunderstorm, for instance, which makes Levertov jump with fear, she hears, in the tension before the next thunderclap, a small bird begin its song.²³ In "The Life Around Us," humans "shut behind curtains" do not observe the night changing to day: "only the sightless trees,/ without braincells, lived it/ and wholly knew it."²⁴ And in another poem entitled "The Life of Others," southbound geese fly high over "men who suppose/ earth is man's," about their own winter preparations, while "We humans are smaller than they, and crawl/ unnoticed,/ about and about the smoky map."²⁵ From the height of their world, we seem insignificant, although we "suppose" our perceptions of the world are all important, or the only ones.

²² "Come Into Animal Presence," Ladder, p. 21.

²³ "The Singer," Alphabet, p. 71.

²⁴ "The Life Around Us," Footprints, p. 57.

²⁵ "The Life of Others," Dust, p. 111.

In Levertov's view, humans are separate not only from other life forms but from each other in what e. e. cummings called our "oneliness." Feeling this separateness at her mother's deathbed, for example, she yearns for one more chance to communicate, because despite all the years of talk and letters, "something went unsaid." She expresses the poignancy of our solitary condition as she steps out to look at the stars at 2:00 a.m.:

No one
 will speak for us
 No one
 but ourselves knows
 what our lives
 are. 26

Such "uncommonness" creates distances between the non-human world and ourselves, as well as distances among ourselves which Levertov both celebrates and seeks to bridge. By intense and reverent attention she can appreciate the unique qualities of other beings; at the same time, she recognizes a great chain of interdependence extends among us. Levertov is intent on finding the links in this chain, which she calls connections and correspondences. Robert Bly has noted a return of modern poets such as Frost and Stevens to a recognition of animals as "separate but equal" entities of the world. He believes this attitude will lead a person to "full consciousness" of himself as a part of the natural world.²⁷ Levertov seems to feel something of

26

"A Look at the Night, Temple, Early 60's," Forest, p. 97.

27 Robert Bly, News of the Universe (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), p. 83.

this as she perceives interrelations in the simplest meetings between human and non-human lives. In a poem called "Exchange" the sea-gulls come inland for a breath of earth-air, while she in turn receives smells and sounds from them that offer her a taste of their life at sea.²⁸ Human beings and plants have their relationships too. Stung by nettles and looking for dockleaves to soothe the pain, she remarks that the dockleaves would be "wasted otherwise."²⁹ Even grief can be shared between species, Levertov believes; she notes in "Kindness" that a three-legged dog with "eyes of kindness" shares her own bereavement over her mother's death.³⁰ Thus, the paradox of the separateness-and-interdependence of all things provides Levertov the possibility of discovering the real nature of (the "authentic") her experiences.

Duality

In tracking down the connective relationships of her universe, Levertov frequently focuses on co-existing polarities or dualities which often lie at the core of things. With William Carlos Williams, she sees the "conjunction of the unreal and the real, the constant

²⁸ "Exchange," Footprints, p. 17.

²⁹ "The Rebuff," Footprints, p. 3.

³⁰ "Kindness," Forest, p. 47.

interaction of two opposites."³¹ Starting as always with "what is at hand," Levertov contemplates, for example, the Janus-faced nature of her own personality. She feels two persons within: one a prosaic housewife-mother, and the other a free-wheeling, impractical dreamer. An early poem names the two personalities "The Earthwoman" and "The Waterwoman." Earthwoman tends to her children's physical needs and clings to the good earth life, while Waterwoman sings to her "thin" children and goes dancing in "dragonfly dresses."³² A later poem, "In Mind," describes the two women within as "one kind and very clean--but she has no imagination." The other is turbulent and "moon-ridden," a young-old woman dressed in opals and rags--but she is not kind.³³ These images are repeated much later in a poem to her husband before their divorce. She sees that he hungers for the homespun woman in her, while the one in crazy feathers (the poet) wearies him. She asks, "Can you endure life with two brides, bridegroom?" Her own reality includes both: "Alas,/ they are not two but one,/ pierce the flesh of one, the other/ halfway across the world, will shriek,/ her blood will run."³⁴

³¹ Wallace Stevens, "Preface to Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams 1921-1931" in William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays by J. Hillis Miller, Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 63.

³² "The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman," Early Poems, p. 31.

³³ "In Mind," Taste, p. 71.

³⁴ "The Woman," Dust, p. 53.

These poems achieve a subtle association of "goodness" with the home-oriented earthwoman whose devotion to the things of the earth results in cheerful usefulness, while the dreamer's sense of mystery, of the unreal, leads to neglect of real-world duties and to misunderstanding in human relationships. In a poignant poem, "The Wings," she imagines herself to possess embryonic wings, one black, one white. The black wing seems to represent the "inimical power" of her creative personality which is not kind--it has swept "flat" the person she speaks to in the poem. She admits the difficulties of flying with such disparate wings, and probes the possibilities of a synthesis: perhaps the black wing could, if freed, become a source of light. But the poem ends with a question, asked with a fine balance of resentment and apology: "could I go/ on one wing,/ the white one?"³⁵ For her, there is no real possibility of being the one personality or the other. Nevertheless, Levertov searches for an "authentic" wholeness which, although paradoxical, will not result in fragmentation of her life. One must make, she feels, a "heroic response" of creative wonder to the dark wing or the waterwoman personality: "the wonder that/ as before/ shows a double face."³⁶ This particular inner duality continues to perplex and intrigue Levertov throughout her life; her later poems show a more passive acceptance of it as will subsequently be pointed out.

³⁵ Denise Levertov, "The Wings," The Sorrow Dance (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 11.

³⁶ "Three Meditations," Ladder, p. 31.

The dualities of her deepest self parallel similar opposites in the process of writing poetry for Levertov. Contemplating her descent from two widely different ancestors, one a Russian rabbi who "prayed with the bench and the floor" and the other Angel Jones, a Welsh tailor who stitched his meditations into coats and britches, she writes:

Well, I would like to make
 thinking some line still taut between me and them,
 poems direct as what the birds said,
 hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
 mysterious as the silence when the tailor
 would pause with his needle in the air. 37

In poetry, as well as within herself, the common, "hard" objects of the earth co-exist with the unseen, the numinous. The "marvelous truth" of the authentic lies in a synthesis of the two. The floor and the bench provide the focus for the "silence" of that mystical nature beyond the thing itself, the total experience of the "authentic" in the commonplace.

The same theme of the mysterious behind the obvious is seen in "With Eyes At the Back of Our Heads." In this poem, the metaphor for the mysterious is first a mountain which she wants to approach through doors which are too narrow; then it becomes the sleeves of a garment which is being knitted as she goes. The latter image seems to echo Yeats who prophesied that it would soon be known that "the natural and the supernatural are knit together."³⁸ In another Levertov poem,

³⁷ "Illustrious Ancestors," Early Poems, p. 77.

³⁸ W. B. Yeats, "A General Introduction for My Work," Modern Poetics, James Scully, Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 23.

the mysterious appears to her as a lagoon where the imagination swims
 "shining of its own light."³⁹ Sometimes, as in "Earth Psalm," she
 tires of the quest for hidden enigmas and would like to forget God
 and the "beyond" and simply

worship mortal, the summoned
 god who has speech, who has wit
 to wreath all words, who laughs
 wrapped in sad pelt and without hope of heaven...⁴⁰

Leverlov's last collection of poems (Life in the Forest) is
 introduced by a quieter acceptance of duality and a finer balance
 between the mundane and the mysterious, between doubt that there is
 anything beyond the obvious, and the ecstasy which arises from the
 experiencing of that very mystery. She pictures a "human being" as
 walking in doubt from childhood on: walking/ a ledge of slippery
 stone...on one/ side of the path, ecstasy, on the other/ dull grief."
 She sees, thankfully now, "the currents of doubt and praise" as dichotomies
 that no longer keep her awake at night. Her "Thanks./ Thanks
 for this day, a day of my life" can be uttered even as she "Pulls up
 the blankets, looking/ into nowhere, always in doubt."⁴¹

Leverlov observes the same dualities in others as in herself.
 In "Face," she compares a friend's expressions of love and hate to a

³⁹ "The Lagoon," Early Poems, p. 90.

⁴⁰ "Earth Psalm," Taste, p. 80.

⁴¹ "Human Being," Forest, p. 3.

sculpture she has seen of Jacob and the Angel. The angel is carved of incandescent white marble, while Jacob is of opaque stone, "unblest."⁴² She comments, "all passionate things are perhaps very close to their opposites. Joy, pain, fear--there comes a point perhaps where one no longer knows which is which."⁴³ She projects this individual duality of good and evil into a devastating description of humankind in "Life at War":

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh
responds to a caress, whose eyes
are flowers that perceive the stars,
...
still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk⁴⁴
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies...

Dichotomies of national and social experiences are natural extensions of personal duality. As her search for the "authentic" moved outward to social experiences, she became concerned with the Viet Nam conflict, Biafra, the ghetto riots, the battle of Berkeley People's Park, and the resistance movement. The anguish and exultation she found in the "inner/outer experience in America" during the 60's and 70's are the major topics of her long poem "Staying Alive" published in 1971. In exploring her own dual feelings about the nature of the

⁴² "Face," Dust, p. 17.

⁴³ Craft Interview, New York Quarterly, in Denise Levertov: Province, p. 18.

⁴⁴ "Life at War," Sorrow Dance, p. 79.

war, she extended her search into personal action as well as poetry, joining the resistance movement with her husband, Mitch Goodman, and even travelling to Viet Nam to see first-hand the effects of the war. In a rare use of irony, she writes of the "fragrance" of life in dying Viet Nam as opposed to the "smell" of death in fast-moving America.⁴⁵ In another Viet Nam poem, "Modes of Being," she tries to weld the sufferings of Viet Nam prisoners onto her own American ease, or at least to bridge them:

Joy
 is real, torture
 is real, we strain to hold
 a bridge between them open,
 and fail,
 or all but fail.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, she continues to search for synthesis: the one "violent eternal instant/ where that which is and/ that which is..." will touch and where the authentic will be viewed clearly for a moment.

Early in her life she was aware of her own involvement in the world's "inscape" and aware that she would have to answer the questions for herself:

I, I, I, I
 I multitude, I tyrant,
 I angel, I you, you
 world, battlefield, stirring
 with unheard litanies...⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "Fragrance of Life, Odor of Death," Dust, p. 36.

⁴⁶ "Modes of Being," Dust, p. 99.

⁴⁷ "Three Meditations, " Ladder, p. 30.

James Mersmann (Out of the Viet Nam Vortex) suggests that a synthesis between the real and the ideal began for Levertov as a result of her exposure to the Viet Nam war; that the defeat of her optimism about the race and a period of personal "death of will" resulted in a true relearning wherein she achieved "new peace and hope, a new sense of human possibility."⁴⁸ This transformation was traced in her book Relearning the Alphabet, and later poems attest to it. For instance, in a rather sad acceptance of "The Way It Is," she still remembers daily the burned, stretched faces of suffering and dying Vietnamese whose "eyes and mouths forever open,/ weight the papers down on my desk." But this anguish also has its counterpart:

Yet almost no day, too, with no
happiness, no
exaltation of larks uprising from the heart's
peat-bog darkness.⁴⁹

The complex dualities of both her inner nature and outer experience have led Levertov to the greatest paradox of all: that of life in death or death in life. In a lecture called "Dying and Living," Levertov elaborates on the beliefs of Rilke and William Carlos Williams, whose ability to praise life in the midst of, even because of, death has become her own quest. "Its praise," she says, "is not for life as opposed to death but for the synthesis, life/death or death/life, the curious embrace and union of positive and negative that is

⁴⁸ Mersmann, p. 104.

⁴⁹ "The Way It Is," Dust, p. 47.

the human condition and indeed the condition of all creation."⁵⁰ Life is always dying; but Levertov is especially anxious about dying of an "unlived life," a phrase of Rilke's which she uses often in her poetry and lectures. Her goal is to live intensely in the present, "Each minute the last minute"⁵¹ so that even her death can be an appropriate culmination of her inner life.

The development of Levertov's understanding of death was influenced hardly at all by the Second World War which she experienced as a young girl in England. As she says, her early poems on death were abstract and vague. Later, in Mexico, that culture's acceptance of the death-in-life duality inspired a poem, "The Weave," in which butterflies grace a dungheap, knowing the "dreamy stench of death" but remaining delicately happy.⁵² The destitute in Mexico and in America, and her involvement in the Viet Nam conflict which took her to see that devastated country, increased her awareness of life-in-death duality. Tracing the theme from Levertov's early poems to her latest, (Life in the Forest), N. E. Condini of the National Review says, "This inward movement to the center of things, to the ultimate core, death, is her fullest achievement."⁵³ Her early poems showed an exuberant celebration of life and rational understanding of the paradox--

⁵⁰ "Dying and Living," Province, p. 50.

⁵¹ "Living," Sorrow Dance, p. 90.

⁵² "The Weave," Ladder, p. 26.

⁵³ N. E. Condini, Review of Life in the Forest in National Review, V. 32 (March 21, 1980), p. 360.

"Falling and rising of leaf and star."⁵⁴ In the Olga poems about her sister's death, she moved toward ritual as a way to deal with death. Now, in the poems on her mother's death in Life in the Forest, she seems to have come to terms with death in a fully conscious wisdom. These poems reveal death as the largest and at the same time the smallest circling of life. Her mother's life is an unfolding "twenty, forty, eighty--the storied screen unfolding/ told and told--."⁵⁵ But it is also a focusing, a centering down, until her mother's carefully tended garden, symbol of her life, vanishes back into wilderness. "Old gods/ took back their own."⁵⁶ In the title poem of her latest volume, the life/death paradox is rounded again into a wholeness of vision. A woman whose hut is "mumbled by termites" is "marked" by the joy of life that has been hers; while the termites chew, her smile bites at "her sense of loss" to maintain the perfect balance of the life-in-death paradox.⁵⁷ We live in the forest, the termites labor; we can only present a countenance that marks us and fight death to the end. Like the imagined stone statue in her mother's garden, Levertov wishes to achieve "the smirk of denial facing eternity."⁵⁸ Sorrow itself becomes beauty the way "snow/ drains the light from day

⁵⁴ "Beyond the End," Early Poems, p. 30.

⁵⁵ "A Daughter, I," Forest, p. 26.

⁵⁶ "Death in Mexico," Forest, p. 32.

⁵⁷ "Life in the Forest," Forest, p. 118.

⁵⁸ "Death in Mexico," Forest, p. 32.

but then...stains the sky yellow/ to glow at midnight."⁵⁹ This positive aspect of the life/death duality drew her to Rilke and Williams, and also, as a young woman, to Chekov's work, who recognized the "subtle, elusive beauty of human grief," and who saw "not only what is, but what might be."⁶⁰ Levertov felt that Chekov knew keenly the negative/positive nature of life, and disagreeing with some critics, she felt he leaned towards the positive. She, too, leans naturally towards the positive, towards life, towards living each moment. "Knowing we are alive each instant," she insists, "[is] what seems to me to be our great, our terrifying but hilarious, our open secret of paradoxical delight."⁶¹

The theme of the dual nature of life has, like other of her themes, not appeared and disappeared with the faddish or revolutionary changes that occur in some poets' work, but has spiraled upward in an observable continuity in her poems. Her progression towards a fuller acceptance of the dualities of life can be traced not only in her poems about war and death, but also in poems about her personal relationships. In an early poem, "The Dreamers" (1946), she regrets "duality's abyss" between herself and her lover, despairing of ever being able to span his reality and hers.⁶² Now, over thirty years

⁵⁹ "The Blue Rim of Memory," Forest, p. 83.

⁶⁰ "Chekov on the West Heath," Forest, p. 10.

⁶¹ "Dying and Living," Province, p. 59.

⁶² "The Dreamers," Early Poems, p. 22.

later, personal emotion has diffused into "all humankind" who long for "absolution each by each," and an indication that the redemptive power of love is not only possible but necessary to bridge our separateness. In "Metamorphic Journal," Levertov returns to a personal history which is now elevated in understanding far above the experience of "The Dreamers." In this later poem, she and a lover have learned an intricate dance of give and take, light and dark, which deeply explores the duality of each, creating a sure and beautiful dance which they perform together.⁶³ She sees life's dualities now as a single, though complex, whole--like the dance itself.

The Imagination

The "authentic" which can be approached through the separateness, connectedness, and duality of all things, can only be seen if the poet brings to his subject the "ecstatic attention, the intensity, that would penetrate to its reality."⁶⁴ Such attention is illustrated in a long poem entitled "Conversation in Moscow" in Freeing of the Dust. In the poem, Levertov struggles to understand three Russians, a poet, a historian and a biologist, through an interpreter. "So much is lost," but with eyes and gestures, and with their "spirits," they try to discuss important truths. It is with this same intensity that Levertov approaches the ordinary things and experiences of her life.

⁶³ "Metamorphic Journal," Forest, p. 126.

⁶⁴ Denise Levertov, "Great Possessions," Poet In the World (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 97.

Her eye, she says, is the rapt receiver of the world's messages:

My starwheel rolls. Stops
on the point of sight.
Reduced to an eye
I forget what
I
was.⁶⁵

Her eyes are her interpreters--but they often fail, for, as she points out, we see only what we expect to see. Lighting on a straw swan under the Christmas tree, her eyes see only "the frail strawness of straw, metal sheen of tinsel."⁶⁶ It is the imagination, however, that is willing to be surprised and which allows glimpses of the "open secret" of every thing. Levertov says in an interview:

One way in which I could define the imagination might be to say it is the power of perceiving analogies and of extending this power from the observed to the surmised. Where fancy supposes, imagination believes, however; and draws kinetic force from the fervor of belief. Rather than breathing life into the dust, though, I see it as perceiving the life inherent in the dust. The poet sees, and reveals in language, what is present but hidden--what Goethe in Wilhelm Meister--or was it Carlyle writing about Goethe?--called the open secret.⁶⁷

It is the imagination which makes the connections between entities, allowing glimpses of the "authentic." To the imagination, the form of the straw swan speaks of gliding, "though one had never seen a swan," and the Christmas tinsel is transformed to "rain suspended in

⁶⁵ "The Cold Spring," Alphabet, p. 5.

⁶⁶ "A Straw Swan Under the Christmas Tree," Early Poems, p. 102.

⁶⁷ Interview by Ian Reid in Southern Review, Province, p. 42.

a beam of light." "How far," she wonders, "might one go/ treading the cleft the swan cut?" Not for a moment, though, will Levertov allow the mysterious to be cut loose from its physical being. In "Forest Altar, September," praising the leafy forest floor, fragrant with "death and change," Levertov determines to live fully in the present, "crouched with the russet toad," not looking upward for heaven and the miraculous, but looking "down into paradise."⁶⁸

All trivial parts of
world-about-us speak in their forms
of themselves and their counterparts!⁶⁹

Julian Gitzen, in an article in Midwest Quarterly, calls Levertov's ability to see mystery in the mundane a balancing act between reality and the imagination.⁷⁰ She herself quotes Whitman's "path between reality and the soul."⁷¹ But she repeatedly asserts that no conscious effort or act of will is required of her, for her vision includes both imagination and reality in a larger whole. As Rudolph L. Nelson points out in an essay comparing the poetry of Duncan and Levertov, "in the Levertov universe there is no radical discontinuity between the worlds of poetic vision and everyday reality."⁷² In "Relearning the

⁶⁸ "Forest Altar, September," Footprints, p. 37.

⁶⁹ "A Straw Swan," Early Poems, p. 102.

⁷⁰ Julian Gitzen, "From Reverence to Attention: The Poetry of Denise Levertov," Midwest Quarterly, XVI, No. 3 (Spring, 1975), p. 328.

⁷¹ "A Common Grouhd," Ladder, p. 1.

⁷² Rudolph L. Nelson, "Edge of the Transcendent," Southwest Review, (Spring, 1969), p. 188.

Alphabet" she says:

relearn the world...
 the heart an eye looking,
 the heart a root
 planted in earth.
 Transmutation is not
 under the will's rule.⁷³

The correspondences in her new alphabet reveal an order behind the universe which Levertov in one poem describes (typically) as sound: a continuous "gong/ of the universe, neither beginning nor ending.../ only seeming/ to cease when we cease/ to listen."⁷⁴ She often uses the appropriate images of "clefts" and "gaps" for glimpses into the depths of the mysterious. In the form of the poems as well, (since they, too, are entities) she employs pauses for the unutterable spaces of meaning between vision and language:

such words as
 carry our testimony
 singular,
 incontrovertible,
 breath and tongue awaiting
 patent,
 or do without.⁷⁵

She believes with Keats that "whatever the Imagination sees as beauty must be truth."⁷⁶ And with Emerson, that one must "look sharply after

⁷³ "U" of "Relearning the Alphabet," Alphabet, p. 119.

⁷⁴ "Magic," Forest, p. 135.

⁷⁵ "A Look at the Night, Temple, Early 60's," Forest, p. 97.

⁷⁶ "Everything That Acts Is Actual," Early Poems, p. 44.

your thoughts" to catch the fleeting truths of the world.⁷⁷ The mysterious is not easy to see because "the third dimension/ hides itself./ If the roadmen/ crack stones, the/ stones are stones."⁷⁸ The mysterious must be approached by attention to the objects at hand, Levertov believes: by stroking the rim of a bronze cup, in "Magic," she hears a hum, then more than a hum, then the universal "gong."

When the mysterious or the third dimension is revealed, it is seen by Levertov as an energy, not a continuous path but a transient moment of crossing. Her approach to this moment has not changed appreciably since her early summons in "Overland to the Islands" (1958):

Let's go--much as that dog goes,
intently haphazard...
 Under his feet
rocks and mud, his imagination sniffing,
engaged in its perceptions--dancing
edgeways, there's nothing
the dog disdains on his way,
nevertheless he
keeps moving, changing
pace and approach but
not direction--"every step an arrival."⁷⁹

In her latest book she is even more vehement:

The lovely obvious!...
The lovely evident!...
The ever-present, constantly vanishing,
carnal enigma!

⁷⁷ "A Turn of the Head," Taste, p. 32.

⁷⁸ "The Third Dimension," Early Poems, p. 46.

⁷⁹ "Overland to the Islands," Early Poems, p. 55.

and changing the image from dog to worm, she states:

"... I want to be
the worm slithering wholebodied
over the mud and grit of what
may be a mile,
may be forever--pausing
under the weeds to taste
eternity...

Where is
my head? Am I not
worm all over? My own
orient!" ⁸⁰

This world contains the miracles, and the imagination provides access to them. William Carlos Williams exclaimed, "No ideas but in things!" and Levertov echoes, "there are no miracles but facts."⁸¹ The authentic is found in the ordinary, the most common and the most intricate components of creation. As the imagination works through the complexities and correspondences of these common things, their mysteries are revealed. She interprets Wordsworth's phrase "emotion recollected in tranquillity" to mean the reliving of an experience in the imagination, not "peacefully" but at a physical distance from it. This work of the imagination, she says, is an "activity," kinetic, dynamic.⁸²

Since the imagination is alert in sleep as well as waking, Levertov believes that dreams are an important source of the authentic, and she often uses them in her poems. In a recent article in Dreamworks ("Interweavings: Reflections on the Role of Dreams in the Making of

⁸⁰ "Artist to Intellectual (Poet to Explainer)," Forest, p. 103.

⁸¹ "The Palm Tree," Early Poems, p. 56.

⁸² Interview by Reid, Province, p. 42.

Poems"), she traces her own use of dreams. At first she talked about her dreams in a "subjective, private inaccessible" way, without allowing her reader to share the significance of the dreams. Later she developed a greater ability to get at the actual clarity of the dream and use it to add another dimension to the "authentic" experience. She speaks of both visual dreams in poems like "Ring of Changes," "The Dog of Art," and "To the Snake," and of verbal dreams in "The Flight" and "In Memory of Boris Pasternak," in which actual phrases or quotes came to her in the dream. "Often a dream presents a ring from which to hang the latent question of that moment in one's life," says Levertov, referring to "The Broken Sandal."⁸³ The dream experience, for her, is simply another "interweaving" of dreaming and waking life "actively...that we experience both most intensely."⁸⁴

The Muse

Although the worm (poet) prepares his own ground for the revelation, Levertov is not unaware of the function of the Muse within. Just before the moment of revelation, she experiences a withdrawal of the imagination, like the head of a snake about to strike, as she explains it. "There is a silent explosion, and a blue light fills the room. Your attention is drawn back, and Wham! You've got an image that

⁸³ Denise Levertov, "Interweavings: Reflections on the Role of Dreams in the Making of Poems," Dreamworks, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1980), p. 139.

⁸⁴ "Interweavings," p. 140.

enters and transforms the poem and brings it alive, sets it afire, and that you never by faithful attention could have discovered. It arises out of that faithful attention."⁸⁵ In her poems, Levertov has used various images to describe the Muse. The Muse is felt like the tides, "intelligence of/ what pulls at our depths for/ design...the pull back/ by moon-ache. The great knots/ of moon-awake energy/ far out."⁸⁶ In a poem called "The Well" Levertov sees the Muse in the form of a dark woman wading a lake to fill her pitcher. Her features are those of Annie Sullivan, who taught the blind-deaf Helen Keller the use of language. At the end of the poem, Levertov's "heart leaps/ in wonder./ Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water' / spelled in my left palm."⁸⁷ In other poems, the Muse is her "All Day Bird";⁸⁸ and in "The Goddess," the Muse is pictured as a powerful deity who violently throws the poet out of "Lie Castle" where face-down in the mud, she bites on a seed of truth. Without the Muse, Levertov says,

nothing
flowers, fruits, sleeps in season,
without whom nothing
speaks in its own tongue, but returns
lie for lie! ⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 25.

⁸⁶ "The Tide," Ladder, p. 14.

⁸⁷ "The Well," Ladder, p. 38.

⁸⁸ "The Cold Spring," Alphabet, p. 5.

⁸⁹ "The Goddess," Early Poems, p. 111.

Other images include the moon and a hero figure who rescues her from a pit.

Whatever the image, the imagination is not "fancy" or "fantasy" for Levertov, but such close attention to the Other that one can "be" it in imagination. In "A Note on the Work of the Imagination," she marvels at the power of her imagination, which in a dream, decorated her hair with a "network of little dew or mist diamonds." In the dream, she had been walking the fields in a "dewfall" hour and her imagination had supplied the tiny, realistic detail.⁹⁰ Imagination is, for Levertov, a "holy, independent faculty" which brings her to the moment of vision.

In the experience from which a poem arises, there is a kind of intensity which happens of itself and gives it a beginning and an end...But the other thing...is the presence of the Muse, the Unexpected. It's something that happens to you... there will be a sudden illumination.⁹¹

Her poems illustrate this quick, singular, lucid moment which never fails to surprise and strike wonder. In reviewing Life in the Forest, Condini says, "Her poems are like Buddha touching the earth at the moment of enlightenment."⁹² Searching for images to describe this delicate and fleeting moment of revelation, Levertov has called it "energy; a spider's thread."⁹³ Again, the moment reminds her of hiving bees' "design in air, joyfully/ reducing possibilities to/ one,

⁹⁰ "Note," PW, p. 203.

⁹¹ Interview by Sutton, Province, pp. 25-26.

⁹² Condini, p. 360.

⁹³ "Beyond the End," Early Poems, p. 30.

the next act."⁹⁴ The most frequent and appropriate image she uses for the moment of connection or germination, however, is that of the seed. The seed contains past, present and future. It is of the earth but stores the mysteries of life, growing, moving, dying to create, creating to die. In herself she feels the desire to "quicken, to activate: extend,"⁹⁵ and she feels the sleeping, growing presence of the Muse within. The most ordinary experiences, like a response from her husband, make seeds of ideas "jump into the ground."⁹⁶ History also has left "a store/ of seeds for planting" in poems that will enter human lives "forever, unobserved..."⁹⁷ In "A Ring of Changes" she implores:

Seed, cling
to the hard earth, some footstep
will grind you in...⁹⁸

It is the moment of germination that Levertov desires to experience and to capture in her poems. In "Artist to Intellectual (Poet to Explainer," she envisions "what every seed/ knows." "My energy/ has not direction,/ tames no chaos,/ creates, consumes, creates/ unceasing

⁹⁴ "A Stir in the Air," Early Poems, p. 80.

⁹⁵ "Beyond the End," Early Poems, p. 30.

⁹⁶ "Marriage II," Early Poems, p. 47.

⁹⁷ "Common Ground," Ladder, p. 1.

⁹⁸ "A Ring of Changes," Early Poems, p. 106.

its own/ wildfires that none/ shall measure."⁹⁹ This authentic moment is captured by the poet's heightened state of total consciousness, not just by intellect, but also by emotions and sensual perception, the imagination, the subconscious, and her Muse.

Organic Form

How does Levertov make the leap from experiencing a piercing moment of "the authentic" to capturing the revelation in a poem? By way of "organic form." Coleridge formulated a theory of organic form based on the principle that the essence of existence is not matter, but process; that the work of art records such process and thereby has the same organic relationships among its parts as has any other vital thing. As with any organic entity, parts cannot be separated from the whole without destroying both.¹⁰⁰

Levertov works on the same principles of the dynamic nature of all things, of finding form rather than imposing it, and of creating wholeness:

A partial definition, then, of organic poetry might be that it is a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such poetry is exploratory.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ "Artist to Intellectual," Forest, p. 103.

¹⁰⁰ English Literary Criticism, p. 41.

¹⁰¹ "Some Notes on Organic Form," PW, p. 7.

She cites three elements necessary to arrive at this form: 1) the poet experiences something with deep attention; 2) the poet is "brought to speech"; 3) the poet must possess an "inscape" or inner sense of form.

First, the involvement of the poet with life, living every moment as the last moment, is essential, as has been explained in the first section of this thesis. Secondly, the poet must recognize what he perceives, which "brings him to speech" or forms itself into language in his mind. For Levertov, there is no actual division between the recognition of a perception and the language in which the recognition is clothed, a phenomenon with which most modern linguists would agree. Experience gives rise to language; language is clothed in experience. This recognition, she says, occurs in "clusters" or "constellations" of perceptions, which is a slightly more synthesizing concept than the sequential nature of Charles Olson's projective verse, wherein "perception follows perception." Levertov sees the process as a "harmonic" rather than "melodic" sequence because it orchestrates events "which exist on a sensuous, psychological, intellectual level--all at once."¹⁰² The form of the poem reflects this interaction like Sandburg's "deliberate prism of words." Comparing the inclusive nature of this perception to music again, Levertov writes:

You must make, said music
in its voices of metal and wood
in its dancing diagrams, moving
apart and together, along
and over and under a line

¹⁰² Interview with Sutton, Province, p. 23.

and speaking in one voice,

my image.¹⁰³ make

Third, the poet possesses an "inscape" himself which includes the way he sees things, the immediate environment ("all sorts of sounds that occur at the same time"), and a sense of form and balance which "anticipates and pre-exists the material."¹⁰⁴ Levertov compares this sense of form in poetry to that which occurs in painting or dance, when one is given a faithful transcription of what one is looking at by balancing vertical lines or opposing elements. It is balance brought about by tension. You may even, she notes, have to do violence to the actual events to enable the poem to live on its own, like cutting a baby's umbilical cord.¹⁰⁵ The tension, like Coleridge's "process" is an intuitive interaction between all the elements involved.

In the same way, content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction; the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and into a central focus or axis, for instance, is discoverable only in the work, not before it.¹⁰⁶

T. S. Eliot called this form sense or inner voice "auditory imagination," described as:

¹⁰³ "The Charge," Early Poems, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ "Notebook Pages," PW, p. 19.

¹⁰⁵ Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ "Organic Form," PW, p. 9.

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.¹⁰⁷

The rhythm and the particular words of the poem arising from the experience-language-inscape combination result in "organic form."

"Form," says Levertov, "is never more than a revelation of content,"¹⁰⁸ or the expression of the "authentic" which then extends to include the poem itself. She elucidates:

...my notion of organic form is really based on the idea that there is form in all things--that the artist doesn't impose form upon chaos, but discovers hidden intrinsic form--and on the idea that poems can arrive at their form by means of the poet's attentive listening, not only his listening but also his feeling, his meditating upon his experience, and by means of his accurate transcription of that experience into words.¹⁰⁹

Rhythm and the Inner Voice

The rhythm of organic form, says Levertov, comes from the "inner voice" which may not be the same as vocalized speech, since it is the lifelong collection of language and thought patterns, conscious and subconscious memories. She believes even Charles Olson's breath-controlled lines may not reflect what he sounds like when he's talking, but may rather reflect the breathing of his inner voice.

¹⁰⁷ T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 118-19 quoted in Three On the Tower by Louis Simpson (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975), p. 103.

¹⁰⁸ "Organic Form," PW, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 22.

What it [inner voice] means to me is that a poet, a verbal kind of person, is constantly talking to himself, inside of himself, constantly approximating and evaluating and trying to grasp his experience in words. And I do it even in dreams... the inner voice...does not necessarily make use of the verbal syntax of intellectually logical speech. It makes all kinds of leaps and bounds because many things are understood. There are many "givens" and "understoods" in its speech and that is why poetry often departs from normal expository syntactical practice.¹¹⁰

Levertov's inner voice grew under the influence of two interesting parents. Her mother's habits of observation and reflection were lighted by an intense joy of life and a deep love of nature. She delighted in recounting stories of her youth in Wales to her children. Denise's father, a Russian Jew converted to Christianity, spent his life helping refugees and working to reconcile the two religions. His Hasidic joy in life and the "world as it is" can certainly be seen in Levertov's own sense of wonder. To their home came frequent visitors: scholars, booksellers, priests and opera singers, who added their voices to those of the books her parents read aloud to Denise and her sister. Denise learned French, Spanish, and a little Italian and Welsh. All these words and language rhythms with their international and religious associations formed the basis of her first songs.

When she came to America as a young woman, she consciously began to re-train her inner voice in the American idiom. She attributes her success in doing so mainly to William Carlos Williams and his poetry. Although she feels her language "has always moved back and forth

¹¹⁰ Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 34.

between English and American usage,"¹¹¹ British idiom is rarely observable in her poems.

Many critics have felt the religious undercurrent in her writing. One says she, like Wallace Stevens, identifies the imagination with God.¹¹² Occasionally, she draws on tales of her Hasidic heritage to illustrate a mystical experience as in "Notes of a Scale"¹¹³ and "Growth of a Poet."¹¹⁴ In the latter, a holy Hassid is pictured in prayer, rocking back and forth in rhythm with his words. On the day commemorating the destruction of the temple and the birth of the Messiah, however, the holy one alters his movement to rock from side to side in true harmony with nature, whose trees sway from side to side in the wind. Similarly, at the moment of revelation, Levertov's purposeful and habitual attention and meditation is transformed; she glimpses the "authentic" reality and is momentarily in harmony with it. Several of her poems are named "Psalms"; the latest, "Death Psalm" (on the timely subject of "laggard death" which disregards human dignity), has the repetitive line beginnings, the parallel lists of facts, and the closing petitions ("O Lord of mysteries...") of the psalms of David.

¹¹¹ Interview by New York Quarterly, Province, p. 8.

¹¹² Stephen Stepanchev, American Poetry Since 1945 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 164.

¹¹³ "Notes of a Scale," Early Poems, p. 103.

¹¹⁴ "Growth of a Poet," Dust, p. 77.

that will "guard it throughout the day."¹¹⁷ She asks: what do trees feel, "up to their knees in fog?" She answers: absolute patience, a happiness that is a "breathing too quiet to hear."¹¹⁸ November willows, still clothed in a "pelt of gold" appear to her like tense animals watching the cold through the bars of their hanging strands.¹¹⁹ Redbuds in spring "break forth/ as Eve from Adam's/ cage of ribs,/ straight from amazed tree trunks."¹²⁰ And what do the trees make of man? One tree, which must soon be cut, "taps and scrapes" at the window, "longing to see clearly my life whose term/ is not yet known."¹²¹ And the peppertrees observe her husband's sleep, tapping on the window to wake him to their existence of berries, light shadows, cats, sounds of marimba and dancing, and the passing day.¹²² More often, however, Levertov does not personify the trees, but tries to see them in their separateness. In "The Life Around Us," the swaying, patient motion of trees "awake all night" is paralleled in the alternating movement of the syllables and lines of the poem:

Poplar and oak awake
all night. And through
all weathers of the days of the year.

¹¹⁷ "Stems," Ladder, p. 35.

¹¹⁸ "The Breathing," Taste, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ "The Willows of Massachusetts," Sorrow Dance, p. 36.

¹²⁰ "April in Ohio," Dust, p. 12.

¹²¹ "Living While It May," Sorrow Dance, p. 38.

¹²² "Scenes from the Life of the Peppertrees," Ladder, p. 74.

There is a consciousness
 undefined.
 Yesterday's twilight, August
 almost over, lasted, slowly changing,
 until daybreak. Human sounds
 were shut behind curtains.
 No human saw the night in this garden,
 sliding blue into morning.
 Only the sightless trees,
 without braincells, lived it
 and wholly knew it.¹²³

Since the trees have life, listening to them is important to
 Levertov in her search for the authentic through nature. In "Crav-
 ing," the trembling speech of the poplars is the only language man can
 interpret in the midst of human carnage and his own ephemeral nature.¹²⁴
 An "eloquent aspen" becomes a way to talk to an old friend as she re-
 calls a moment of truth they shared by the tree. "The Word itself/ is
 what we heard, and shall always hear, each leaf/ imprinted, syllables
 in our lives."¹²⁵

Such weaving of tree life and tree form and tree talk into her
 experience has resulted in an abiding symbol of "the forest" in her
 poems, representing both the world and the holy place of mystery, in-
 separable elements of Levertov's vision. One must live in the forest
 (which Condini agrees is Levertov's metaphor for the world), know-
 ledgeable of the termites and decay, smilingly defiant of death, even
 when the trees begin "to come in of themselves evenings."¹²⁶ "Life in

¹²³ "The Life Around Us," Footprints, p. 57.

¹²⁴ "Craving," Dust, p. 45.

¹²⁵ "Writing to Aaron," Forest, p. 5.

¹²⁶ "Life in the Forest," Forest, p. 118.

sip by sip
 tree-thirst, flesh of wood that harbors
 that dreamer.¹²⁸

The inner voice, it appears, is a kind of inner self which does not forget its earliest images, but deepens and builds on them as time goes on. Her Hasidic heritage and an intense absorption with the natural world have informed Levertov's inner voice and furthered her search for the authentic.

The Word: Sound

The transition from the inner voice to communication with another is effected by language. As Levertov states, the "very fact of concrete manifestation, of paint, of words, reaches over beyond the world of inner dialogue."¹²⁹ While the inner voice instructs the poet in his choice of words, rhythms, and form, the intellect is also at work. Levertov lives by a dictum of Ibsen's: "The task of the poet is to make clear to himself, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions."¹³⁰ The poet's "making clear," she feels, is art: the combination of the subjective power of saying, and the objective clarity of the thing said, the "enduring clarity of the right words."¹³¹ Finding the right words, however, is not a manipulative process, as Robert Duncan pointed out ("language is not a set of counters to be

¹²⁸ "Metamorphic Journal, Forest, p. 126.

¹²⁹ "Origins of a Poem," PW, p. 49.

¹³⁰ "Origins," PW, p. 44.

manipulated") but a continuation of the search for the authentic by the process of attention. Levertov believes:

Writing poetry is a process of discovery, revealing inherent music, the music of correspondences, the music of inscape. It parallels what, in a person's life, is called individuation: the evolution of consciousness toward wholeness, not an isolation of intellectual awareness but an awareness involving the whole self, a knowing, (as man and woman know one another), a touching, a "being in touch." 132

Levertov says that the motif for a poem emerges from her subconscious or preliminary "attention" without conscious effort. But

how clear it is, and how much clearer it becomes, under scrutiny, depends on the writer's attention, and on the degree to which he is able to translate into words that which he experiences; or rather on how well he can listen for the words that are its incarnation, its taking on the flesh. 133

The word, then, is the flesh of the poem. And the primary element in the word, for Denise Levertov, is sound. The sound of a word emanates from the authentic core of an experience, although it cannot be separated from other considerations in the poem, like rhythm and spacing and preceding words. The sound of the chosen word must correspond to the object. "If one is speaking of something fine, thin, and sharp," says Levertov, "one has to choose the words that have the finest, thinnest, lightest, sharpest sound and not words that have round, dark, warm, thick sounds." 134 The visual image (phanopoeia) must be accompanied

132 "Origins," PW, p. 54.

133 "Working and Dreaming," PW, p. 223.

134 Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 27.

by the sound image (melopoeia), which Levertov feels is closer to onomatopoeia than Pound's "musical over-and-aboveness."¹³⁵ Such emphasis on sound is manifest in all her poetry, but since "Relearning the Alphabet" is an obvious experiment in gathering words around the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds, part of that poem will serve to illustrate her sensitivity to sound:

O

Hostile. Ordinary. Home.
Order. Alone. Other.

Hostile longing. Ordinary rose, omnivorous.
 Home, solitude.
Somnolence grotto.
Caught. Lost. Orient almost,
volition.
Own. Only.

Pain recedes, rising from heart to head
and out.

 Apple thunder, rolling over the
attic floor.

 Yet I would swear
 there had been savage light
 moments before.¹³⁶

Out of the mental experimentation with "O" words, rolls the image of an apple, round as any "O" and solid as thunder, like the pain which rises from "heart to head/ and out." Then the poem turns back on itself as she remembers a moment "before" when lightning flashed through her consciousness--the cause from which the reverberations of the

¹³⁵ Sutton, Province, p. 27.

¹³⁶ "Relearning the Alphabet," Alphabet, p. 110.

whole poem radiate.

Sound, says Levertov, also carries the burden of the emotion of the poem. She insists that even a poem barely understandable by the intellect (such as some surrealistic poetry) can give pleasure and intuitive meaning by sound alone. No surrealist herself, Levertov plainly reveals the spiral of emotions that occur when she is in the process of writing in "Poem Rising By Its Own Weight." The singing quality of this poem, its sounds, indeed cause it to rise effortlessly from pride through surprise and suffering to relief and finally ecstasy.

The singing robes fly onto your body and cling there silkily,
you step out on the rope and move unfalteringly across it,

and seize the fiery knives unscathed and
keep them spinning above you, a fountain
of rhythmic rising, falling, rising
flames,
and proudly let the chains
be wound about you, ready
to shed them, link by steel link,
padlock by padlock--

but when your graceful
confident shrug and twist drives the metal
into your flesh and the python grip of it tightens
and you see rust on the chains and blood in your pores
and you roll
over and down a steepness into a dark hole
and there is not even the sound of mockery in the distant air
somewhere above you where the sky was,
no sound but your own breath panting:
then it is that the miracle
walks in, on his swift feet,
down the precipice straight into the cave,
opens the locks,
knots of chain fall open,
twists of chain unwind themselves,
links fall asunder,
in seconds there is a heap of scrap-
metal at your ankles, you step free and at once

The erotic words and images of flesh, blood, dark hole, panting, walking straight into the cave, falling open, as well as the rhythmic rising, falling movement make this a love poem, an experience of release and ecstasy experienced by the poet with her Muse.

Movement

"Poem Rising By Its Own Weight" makes a good pivot to another factor in Levertov's "organic form, which is movement. It is, we remember, the rhythm of the inner voice she is attempting to record, the inscape of emotion itself. In the beginning of the poem, pride and competence move in a steady rhythmical cadence, almost a march, like circus performers in a promenade around the tent before a performance. They may gyrate, leap and gesture, but their feet never miss the beat of the band. In the poem, the first and second lines rise to the middle and fall, the third line rises, the fourth falls. Then the shortened speeded-up actuality of "rising, falling, rising/ flames" concludes one thought pattern. The next, and climactic, trick is described with a barker's repetitious come-on style: "link by steel link,/ padlock by padlock--." Suddenly the rhythm of "success" is broken by the word "but" off toward the right margin. The action of descent is speeded up by "ands" and the broken panting lines of fear, uneven in length, which come to rest in the silence of one's own breath--and a colon. Here is the pause (mentioned earlier) of the snake's head drawn back, the attention in abeyance which Levertov described as the moment preceding vision. Then! The poem, having fallen and fallen and come to rest at the bottom, now takes up the skilled and purposeful

rhythm of an emergency room. Knife. Scissors. Scalpel. "Walks in."
 "Straight into the cave." "Opens the locks." At the pivotal point
 when "you step free" and "he turns to go," a new rhythm builds that is
 sexual in its throbbing release. It slows with "ands"--turns and
 raises and strokes and holds,--and slows further still with the repe-
 titition and indentation of "holds" to the encompassing last line "close
 and tenderly." The last phrase is typical of Levertov's full closing
 of the circle of form and meaning: "before he vanishes."

Unlike some poets who develop a recognizable rhythm, Levertov is
 able to achieve great variety in rhythm, even within one poem, because
 the rhythm is indigenous to the events and relationships of the poem.
 With the first aura or "smell" of a poem, she often catches a rhythm.
 As she says, if the smell is "bear" then he might be going "pad, pad,
 pad." A bird or squirrel would have a "blipblipblipblip" rhythm per-
 haps.¹³⁸ The rhythms are "organic," and for her, therefore, authentic
 reproductions or revelations of the experience, and altered with such
 smooth and natural transition that she outshines even her mentor,
 William Carlos Williams, in this skill. Where, in language, has the
 decreasing swing of a plumb-line, pulled irresistibly to its dead
 center and cessation, ever been so perfectly captured?

The plumb-line
 doesn't swing, it
 comes to rest

¹³⁸ Review by New York Quarterly, Province, p. 10.

a cold small weight
 hung from its faithful cord
 level with heart's core. ¹³⁹

Not only should the rhythms of a poem correspond to the objects and meanings within the poem, Levertov believes, but they should follow conversational English. The thinking-feeling process of composing a poem, she says, does not go on at a steady pace: like conversation, it walks, dances, hurries, slows, even stops.¹⁴⁰ Polysyllables move fast; monosyllables slowly. It is not so much the number as the kind of syllables used, she maintains, that alter the rhythm of the line. Hard consonants, for instance, slow the reading as they are harder to pronounce.¹⁴¹ Her poem "Six Variations" was intended to illustrate this variation of syllabic movement. (The first section is a sentence with conversational pauses; the second a two-syllable balance; the third the irregular measure of dog "slurping"; the fourth slow monosyllables; the fifth long lines and faster movement of descriptive material; the sixth the slower, broken lines of "vowels of sorrow.")¹⁴²

Williams listened for the natural spaces between words and phrases and wrote in what he called "variable foot." Levertov sees the natural rhythm as a pulse that is tapped out, an implied beat, comparing it to music where one bar may have two notes and another sixteen, but the

¹³⁹ "Letter," Forest, p. 120.

¹⁴⁰ Review by New York Quarterly, Province, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ Review by New York Quarterly, Province, p. 12.

¹⁴² "Six Variations," Ladder, p. 16.

bar length is the same.¹⁴³ She has called this pulse "the horizon note" of the poem, after a quote by Emerson: "The health of the eye demands a horizon."¹⁴⁴

Spacing and line breaks work toward the organic rhythm also. Levertov is not so interested in the visual effect of the poem on the page (although she feels that a poem which has a lot of surrounding space on a page is more attractive to most readers than one which fills the page) as in the use of spaces for rhythm. A line break, she says, has the length of "half a comma."¹⁴⁵ It changes not only the rhythm but the pitch, the voice of intonation, of the poem. There are even, she feels, "equivalents of gesture" in poetry, spaces where "words fail me."¹⁴⁶ She credits Robert Duncan with teaching her about "rifts" in a poem--"great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all."¹⁴⁷ She tried to put this concept into the imagery of a poem called "The Crack": on a snowy evening, a spring night enters her mind, and she muses:

For this, then,
that slanting
line was left, that crack, the pane
never replaced.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Interview by Sutton, Province, p. 32.

¹⁴⁴ "Organic Form," PW, p. 12.

¹⁴⁵ "Function of the Line," Province, p. 72.

¹⁴⁶ Sutton, Province, p. 35.

¹⁴⁷ "Organic Form," PW, p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ "The Crack," Taste, p. 28.

Such rifts are evident in sudden changes of metaphor as in the poem "Journeyings":

Majestic insects buzz through the sky
bearing us pompously from love to love,
grief to grief,
expensively,
motes in the gaze of that unblinking eye.

Our threads of life are sewn into dark cloth,
a sleeve that hangs down over
a sinister wrist. All of us.
It must be Time whose pale fingers
dangle beneath the hem...

Solemn filaments, our journeyings
wind through the overcast.¹⁴⁹

The best illustration of such clefts in perception, perhaps, is the brief, succinct poem "Abel's Bride" which moves by short sentences or fragments from image to image as if indeed "leaping across" perceptions of great depth:

Woman fears for man, he goes
out alone to his labors. No mirror
nests in his pocket. His face
opens and shuts with his hopes.
His sex hangs unhidden
or rises before him
blind and questing.

She thinks herself
lucky. But sad. When she goes out
she looks in the glass, she remembers
herself. Stones, coal,
the hiss of water upon the kindled
branches--her being
is a cave, there are bones at the hearth.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ "Journeyings," Dust, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ "Abel's Bride," Sorrow Dance, p. 13.

Leverlov herself is nearly at a loss in describing these gaps:

The X-factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps. A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side--that's ecstasy.¹⁵¹

This continued attempt at fidelity to her inner voice, which has had long and careful experience with the variations of language and music, and an ear for the "outer voice" of human speech has given Leverlov a very sure skill in producing natural or "organic" sound and rhythms in her poems.

The Development of Organic Form

Leverlov's strong belief in the inner energies and organic completeness of all things and events makes her poems vital with energy, and readily accessible. In one poem, she visualizes herself as standing with the whole human race on "common ground" which is "gritty with pebbles" or "uncommon fine for ploughing." Her poems are the pebbles she reaches for, and the seeds she plants in the soil, eaten "in common" with all kinds of people, "laborers and wanderers."¹⁵² Her words are as solid and understandable as the stones she so often uses for images. "The best work is made," she says, "from hard, strong

¹⁵¹ "Organic Form," PW, p. 13.

¹⁵² "Common Ground," Ladder, p. 1.

materials./ obstinately precise--/ the line of the poem, onyx,
steel."¹⁵³

Like stones, her poems seem to have an infinite variety of properties. If the form of her poems is "found" in the innate properties of the universe, then it follows that the poems would, in turn, have infinite possibilities themselves. Nevertheless, her poems are always recognizable by the limits she has set for herself; the rock is a rock and cannot be mistaken for anything else. Organic form does have freedom "from pre-existing, re-usable metric molds. But thereafter it uses its freedom to different ends," she says, voluntarily placing itself under the "variable, unpredictable, but nonetheless strict laws of inscape, discovered by instress."¹⁵⁴ Her interest in organic form led her to experiment with shorter lines, indentations and spacing; the events of her life also added richness and variety to her work. Her involvement in the protests over the Viet Nam War elicited more discursive poems and even an imitation of Williams' "Paterson" in a long collage of poetry, verbatim news articles, quotes and conversations about the war called "Staying Alive." She is still experimenting in her latest book, Life in the Forest, having used some autobiographical material (her mother's detach), small series of poems ("Modulations for Solo Voice"), and an attempt at narration through depiction of scene, which tends to longer lines and more discursive structure than her usual style. But in all the changes, Denise Levertov's organic form

¹⁵³ "Art," Early Poems, p. 129.

¹⁵⁴ "A Further Definition," PW, p. 14.

remains distinctly hers for the very reason that it is organic to the individual poem, the object, and the experience of her life. Her vision, as pointed out earlier, never moves entirely away from the thing, the earthbound fact, into intellectual or mystical flights. Mystical moments always begin and end in the earthly object or experience which revealed them, skillfully molded in a form which is organic to the subject.

To illustrate the variety Levertov has been able to achieve with organic form in her search for "authentic" experience, I will discuss three poems, "Love Poem," "Photo Torn From the Times," and "Cancion." These choices illustrate three of her major themes: love, the things of the world, and poetry.

Love Poem

Maybe I'm a 'sick part of a
sick thing'
 maybe something
 has caught up with me
certainly there is a
mist between us
 I can barely
see you
 but your hands
are two animals that push the
mist aside and touch me. 155

A visual dimension to the sounds and rhythms of her organic form is added by the spacing of some of Levertov's poems, especially her earlier ones like the one above. The straight left-hand margin provides security and certainty; the right-hand margin, uncertainty. The

155 "Love Poem," Early Poems, p. 35.

opening statement is a "maybe," but it has been told to her as a certainty by her lover. Her own doubt ("maybe something/ has caught up with me") starts toward the right and moves to another left-margin fact: "certainly there is a/ mist between us." Alone on the vague right, she whispers "I can barely" and smacked up hard against the left, the objective experience "see you" reverberates with other meanings of "see," such as "understand" or "experience." Then indented, but not all the way to uncertainty, is the contradiction of the alienation she is experiencing: "but your hands" (which moves quickly back to the left, securely) "are two animals that push the/ mist aside and touch me."

The imagery as well as the spacing is organic to the events of this poem. The mist that clouds her relationship is of the mind, her lover's mental picture of her involvement in a "sick thing." But the drawing force of physical love, revealed in the images of hands like animals, overcomes the mental mist and "touches" her. Levertov can be compared to Rilke in her use of images that grow naturally from the material like "brown tight cones" from a tree.¹⁵⁶ The final image of two animals grows naturally from the common human experience of love. That is, hands, a symbol of the physical side of the physical-spiritual duality of a love relationship, are as warm, hairy, full of energy and as intellectually unaware as animals. Physical touch can overcome intellectual doubts and emotional wounds, at least temporarily. The "animal" soothes the "spiritual"; therefore, this image is organic to

¹⁵⁶ C. F. MacIntyre, Rilke: Selected Poems (Berkeley University of California Press, 1940), p. 8.

her subject. The resolution of the tension between pain and pleasure, doubt and surety, which is held until the last three lines, comes with the impact of surprise that marks an exceptional poem. "Love Poem" demonstrates how Levertov recognizes a universal and "authentic" experience, and reveals it in organic form.

In her essay, "Poet in the World," Levertov declares that "the interaction of life on art and of art on life is continuous."¹⁵⁷ Every experience, even the painful personal relearning which the Viet Nam War caused her to undergo, is useful, even necessary to her poetic vision. E. M. Forster's belief that we need "only connect," and William Carlos Williams' belief that there are "no ideas but in things" are convictions which grow stronger in Levertov with every book of poems. The thing of the world in this case is a photo torn from the newspaper; the experience is a black woman's testimony about a racial disturbance in which her 10-year-old son was killed. The precision of the mystery-in-the-ordinary detail, the personal tone, and the form which grows out of the picture into a poem are characteristically Levertov's.

Photo Torn From the Times

A story one might read and not know
(not have to know)

the power of the face--

¹⁵⁷ "The Poet In the World," PW, p. 112.

'Ten-year-old Eric
was killed during racial tension last summer'

Testimony...
'tears...
in her eyes...
"I am not afraid
of anyone.
Nothing else
can happen to me
now that my son
is dead."

But the power is there to see, the face
of an extreme beauty, contours
of dark skin luminous
as if candles shone unflickering
on beveled oiled wood.

Her name, Alluvita,
compound of earth, river, life.

She is gazing
way beyond questioners.

Her tears
shine and don't fall.¹⁵⁸

The poem and the experience begin with the poet's habitual reading of the morning newspaper. A courtroom testimony concerning a racial incident is common fare. But the author is caught by the universal "power of the face" of a black woman whose picture she sees with the article. Now arrested by the photo, she indents in newspaper-column-short lines the skimmed facts: ten-year-old, killed, testimony, tears. The words of the mother are put forcefully in italics, broken-lined and idiomatic, the easily recognizable speech patterns of a witness on the stand whose courage is born of hopelessness.

¹⁵⁸ "Photo Torn From the Times," Dust, p. 23.

Now the casually approached experience, which has gained heaviness and impact with each of the mother's words, takes on the structured and meditative reaction of the poet in a longer stanza, enclosing a metaphor of great depth and dissemination. The dark face is luminous "as if candles shone unflickering on beveled oiled wood." Here are associations with the stately black queens of Africa, the votive candles and oiled wood of churches, the determination of light in the midst of darkness.

In the next brief couplet, the woman's name echoes the power and extreme beauty of the woman of the previous stanza, and envisions her as the Earth-mother of the elements.

There is another stanza pause while the poet backs away for another look, and "sees" the jury and the lawyers who have been plying the woman with questions. The woman is gazing "far beyond" them. We recognize the gaze--it is watching images of her child in memory and is glazed over with the distance of grief.

In a last brief beautiful detail, the experience is wholly revealed. "Her tears/ shine and don't fall." The final image of un-fallen tears creates that still-life tension which will imprint itself forever on the mind. The ephemeral "authentic" moment is caught by a combination of photography and the poem. Levertov captures with great sensitivity and strength the power of a face in its dualities of light and darkness, movement and stillness, and tears that gather but do not fall.

Levertov creates further tension in the poem by a cadence that echoes the characteristic parallelism used by the Hebrew psalmists.

The statement or question is thrown like a stone into a pond, whereupon widening circles send back answer. Statement, confirmation; cause, effect. Then, in a minute alteration of the placing of one word in the last stanza, the rise/fall effect is interrupted and slowed, and the four single-syllable words of the final line drop down to the period like the invisible tears they trace. "Photo" is a skillful and moving illustration that Levertov believes organic form resides in everything, even a newspaper photo and the experience behind it.

Finally, the poem "Cancion" unites all her skills in one of the few Levertov poems which is unabashedly mystical and symbolic.

Cancion

When I am the sky
a glittering bird
slashes at me with the knives of song.

When I am the sea
fiery clouds plunge into my mirrors,
fracture my smooth breath with crimson sobbing.

When I am the earth
I feel my flesh of rock wearing down:
pebbles, grit, finest dust, nothing.

When I am a woman--O, when I am
a woman,
my wells of salt brim and brim,
poems force the lock of my throat.¹⁵⁹

The "I" of the poem clothes herself in the roles of sky, sea and earth before coming to her true nature as "woman" and poet. In each image, the specific assaults and opens up the universal; a bird

¹⁵⁹ "Cancion," Dust, p. 49.

"slashes" at the sky, clouds "plunge into" and "fracture" the sea; decomposition wears down the rock base of the earth to dust and finally to nothing. The sky and the glittering bird (which may represent the poet and her Muse) are in a violent partnership of song. The sea and the clouds likewise break through mirrors and "smooth breath" to the violence of passion or "crimson sobbing." And always there is the relentless wearing away of every physical thing on its way to death or nothingness. The poet, startlingly, puts herself imaginatively into the elements to delve to the core of their great forces. But, although this is a courageous act, she must at length imagine herself, the consciousness that interprets, and descend to the authentic core of herself, which turns out to be "wells of salt."

The fourth image is set apart from the first three by literary devices which emphasize the shift from outer to inner, from imagination to reality. A repetition of "when I am a woman" slows down the violent breathless pace of the first three stanzas, but keeps an echo of the mood with the exclamation "O." A change of movement occurs, too, as the suddenness of slashing and plunging and the inexorable grinding down are almost synthesized in the image of imminent overflow: "brim and brim." The swift switch of images and pace might be confusing except for the spiral movement which draws the attention steadily, irresistably to the vortex of the poem, the "wells of salt"--and then lifts violently upward with the final line, "that force the lock of my throat." The early violence of the poem settles hard into this final statement.

Water and wells are often used as symbols of inspiration (the water of life; deep wells of consciousness) but Levertov chooses a

much more prosaic, particular substance which is even opposite in effect: salt. The container remains a "well"; the juxtaposition with salt creates tension or curiosity but keeps the association with water. Although both water and salt are metaphors for the necessary elements of life, no romantic, eloquent emotions are usually associated with salt. As always, Levertov chooses a lowly object and elevates its commonplaceness. "Salt" elicits tanginess, tastiness, savoriness, even the New Testament to be "the salt of the world"--and it may also elicit its opposite attributes: flatness, dullness and tastelessness. The fine graininess of salt approaches the fluidity of water, so that the image of "brimming" is quickly assimilated. It is just as quickly arrested by the opposing force of the locked throat which must be forced open. Typically, Levertov does not use the romantic word "heart" or the general word "speech," but the specific physical thing, "throat," creating an exact image.

Salt has properties not only of tastiness but of disintegrating power (echoing the grinding grit of the third stanza), of eating away. But this image turns quickly into a more solid agent of destruction like a crowbar. Poems rising from the salt wells "force the lock" of her throat. The poet and the writing of poetry are fraught with the violence of the natural universe; her human imagination sees the interactions of sky with bird, sea with cloud and rock with time to be as passionate and personal as her own struggles in the creative process.

In "Cancion" Levertov uses the devices of synaesthesia and juxtaposition of opposites. The song "slashes" at her; breath is "fractured" by clouds; and the rock has "flesh." We have already noted salt wells

and the locked throat. The many "s" sounds in the first two stanzas match the sibilant sea and swift birds. The wearing earth is represented by grinding "r's" and "w's" and the alliterative thrust of "s's," "f's," "r's," and "w's" propel the sound from closed beginning to open end. "Song" and "sobbing" are audible inscapes behind which murmur the undertones of the earth wearing down. The final sound of the poem in the throat pulls us into human language which is, although difficult, more articulate than the voices of the natural world. The o-or-ock-o vowel sounds of the last line support the choking image of the locked throat.

"Cancion" follows the path to revelation--through nature to one's own nature to the deep subconscious and back out to language and communication which is the poem. The sequence develops as naturally as sight: up to the sky, out to the sea, down to the earth and thence inevitably to one's own feet, one's self. Levertov's eye notes the bird in the sky, the broken sea reflecting sunset clouds, the varying stages of rock becoming dust; as ever moving from general to specific, from the vast to the particular, from nature to the poem.

The lines are broken "organically," giving space for breath and thought after each rumination: "When I am the sky (sea, earth),..." except for the last stanza. Then there is the shorter pause of a dash after "When I am a woman"--she knows what that is like; and the quick uptake of emotion, "O." Repetition of the phrase and placement of "a woman" on a line of its own, emphasize her intimate knowledge of the state of woman and make the transition to a complete reversal of subject matter in the poem while retaining the song form indicated by

the title "Cancion." Each stanza contains its reference to the poet-woman: song, mirrors and sobbing, flesh of rock, and the personal pronouns, but the swift descent inward with its surprising juxtapositions confirms the unity of inner and outer experiences. Levertov has achieved a double impact by describing the writing of a poem within the poem itself.

Conclusion

Levertov, like many contemporary artists, feels a pervasive need to achieve within herself and her poetry a wholeness of perception in the face of a fragmented universe. But while others seem to work with no real clues as to what the "whole" may turn out to be, Levertov believes the whole is extant in the core of all things. If one gives extreme attention to the thing or experience, peeling away layers of preconceptions and partial truths, she believes the "authentic" (the core and truth) will stand revealed.

Others have searched for wholeness in particular scenes like the wilderness of Alaska (John Haines) or the west (William Stafford); in the psychic inner workings of the poet's mind (Plath); in causes such as minority rights (Rich, Clifton and Ginsberg); or even in political holocausts like war (Jarrell). Levertov ranges over all these subjects and themes as well as domestic ones. She persistantly cleaves to the belief that the experience and understanding of the authentic is to be found in the things at hand, which, despite their commonness, she considers unique. This sense of immediacy has kept her poetry alive

and growing through the changes of thirty years without losing continuity.

Her reverent attention to the intricate details and the uniqueness of the commonplace and her use of organic form sets Levertov in the traditions of Rilke, Pound and Williams, but places her also on a singular path which she has created and from which she has not deviated. Rilke's "organic images," Pound's experiments with phanopoeia, and Williams' determination to cling to the thing and his own New Jersey environment are some of the structures on which Levertov has built her own poetry. She has achieved an integration of "seeing" (reverent attention), "recognition" (meaning and theme) and "organic form" (revelation of structure) which is stamped with a balanced and optimistic personal tone. Yeats said "all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt...and ancient salt is the best packing."¹⁶⁰ He would say Denise Levertov's poems are "packed in salt"; that is, they are personal but not hermetic. She speaks, as Yeats said the poet should, to herself as the "crowd, the lonely man, the nothing."¹⁶¹ Her poems come into the world like "salt grinding and grinding from the magic box."¹⁶²

Levertov's view of the authentic is one of movement and energy. There is no static quality, no permanent or fixed condition in her

¹⁶⁰Yeats, Modern Poetics, pp. 25-26.

¹⁶¹Yeats, Modern Poetics, pp. 25-26.

¹⁶²"A Soul Cake," Forest, p. 42.

poems. They are circular, song-like, forever in motion. The
"authentic" is new each moment; her search for the authentic
continues.

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